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Police turning to military?

The images this week of Ferguson, Missouri in the wake of the civil unrest caused by the death of unarmed African-American teenager Michael Brown have been shocking to say the least. Were the dateline removed from the pictures, one could easily imagine them emanating from some far-away war zone, and not a suburb of St. Louis.

Officers dressed in full combat gear, carrying automatic weapons, riding atop Ballistic Engineered Armored Response Counter Attack Trucks and deploying tear gas, flashbangs and Long Range Acoustic Devices sent a shudder through the spines of many this week.

This unfortunate debacle is a stern reminder of the creeping militarization of America's local police forces, which has blossomed with more than a little help from the Department of Defense's plan to rid itself of excess property, known as the 1033 Program.

This allows paraphernalia from the battlefields to be funneled straight to local police forces to the tune of \$4.3 billion worth of property since the National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 1997 was passed, according to the official website.

Several municipalities in our own state have become one of the more than 8,000 agencies to benefit. Last month, Lawrence acquired a 24-ton, 12-foot-high mine-resistant ambush protected vehicle.

“Other departments that have acquired MRAPs include the Johnson County, Morgan County and Jefferson County sheriff’s departments, and the West Lafayette, Merrillville, Mishawaka and Terre Haute police departments,” reported Steph Solis of The Indianapolis Star on July 1.

As was shown clearly in Ferguson, this vehicle and those like it are totally alienating anyone not inside, further exacerbating any pre-existing tensions. Here is how the late journalist Michael Hastings described riding in an MRAP while embedded in Afghanistan in his book, “The Operators”:

“Add a life support system pumping oxygen into the metallic caverns and you might as well be cruising around in a tank on occupied Mars,” he wrote. “Rather than project strength, the MRAP perversely sent another message: the complete fear and hatred the Americans had for the people they were supposedly there to protect.”

Ask yourself this: If military tactics and equipment normally only used in battle are showing up on our streets, are we now the enemy?